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THE DARK TOWER THE GUNSLINGER

MARVEL
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2 of 5

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THE JOURNEY BEGINS

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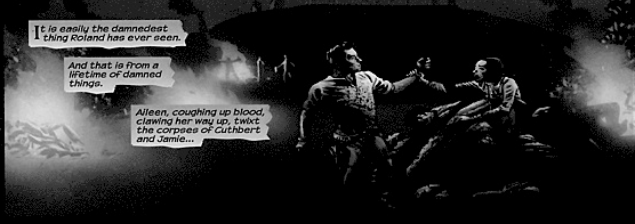
IN A WORLD THAT HAS MOVED ON...

Roland Deschain is the last descendant of the line of Arthur Eld. His late father, Steven, was the king of the barony of Gilead. Seeking to emulate his father, Roland was the youngest man to ever become a gunslinger. Great forces have swirled around him since that day.

When Gilead was under attack by the armies of evil led by Walter O'Dim and the Good Man, John Farson, Steven Deschain was killed. His forces of the White known as The Affiliation faltered in their defense of the city. Roland and his ka-tet became Gilead's final barrier, and they, too, failed.

And for nigh unto ten years, Roland, the lone survivor of that last, losing battle, has pursued his destiny. His quest is to reach the mysterious Dark Tower wherein he can set this out-of-synch world right. And the key to his goal lies with the Man in Black, who Roland now doggedly tracks.

Along the way, the gunslinger stops at the cabin of an old man, when his mule dies of exhaustion. At dinner that evening, Roland reminisces about the aftermath of the battle of Jericho Hill wherein his entire ka-tet was slain, and Deschain himself was dumped upon a pile of corpses.



It is easily the damndest
thing Roland has ever seen.

And that is from a
lifetime of damned
things.

Aileen, coughing up blood,
clawing her way up, twixt
the corpses of Cuthbert
and Jamie...



...like death itself didn't
want no part of her.



It's a
miracle.

It's a damned
miracle!



It's going to
be fine, Aileen, I
swear to you...

This is...this
is a *sign*! A sign
that the gods
believe in us and
want us to
triumph!

If they wanted
that...maybe they...
might have considered
having...way fewer
of us die...



We'll take
whatever
victories we
can.



Another
victory like
this...

...and
we are
undone.



We can
still...

No, Roland. My
skin burns, our friends
are in flames, and our
dreams with them.



Take
me home,
Roland.



You...you
can't mean
Gilead...

I can and do.
Let me lie with my
fathers in our family
crypt, instead of
beneath some...some
unmarked stone in
the desert.

No. Our
quest ends
at the *Park
Tower*.

Roland...

We will sound the
horn while standing in
a field of red roses,
and call the names of
our fallen comrades
one by--

Rip the
dreams from
your eyes! I
am *undone*!
A walking
corpse!

And yet I
would break what's
left of my body to
pieces at your behest!
Instead I am asking
you...begging
you...

Honor
my last
request!



It...
shall be
done.



*It's a full day later when Roland,
dragging Aileen along on a travois--
her skin deathly gray and blood
soaking her bandages--comes
across yet another atrocity.*

*You'd think he'd be used to it by
now, but instead he curses out
this latest example of Farson's
handwork like it's the first time
he's ever seen something like it.*



*...though "survivor"
is a mite too
generous a word.*

*Roland arrives just in time
to hear his death rattle.*

Merchants on their way to market no doubt, lying with their throats cut, or dead from the kind of poisoned darts that Roland knows all too well.

The only survivor is a young boy, guarded by what's obviously his pet billy-bumbler...

Your young master is beyond pain, creature. He has moved--

'Ohn.

W-what?
Uhm...yes.
He's--

'Ohn!
'Ohn!
'Ohn!





A shallow grave for the merchants, with rocks piled atop 'em, is all Roland has time for.

He mutters some prayers out of habit, although ya really have to wonder if he believes someone is listening anymore.



Or at least someone who's gonna do anybody any good.



Not much in the way of supplies left, but I suppose beggars can't be choosers.

Oozers.

You served your master well, Billy.



Here is where you and he part ways.

Although I suppose you'll meet up again, by and by.



By.



Day rolls into night, as Roland prepares a dinner that he'll be eating more out of obligation than desire.

Off to the side, Aileen drifts in and out of consciousness, muttering. He's given up trying to ken what she's saying.



The night's quiet, save for buzzing bugs Aileen's about.

He tunes them out...

...and so doesn't hear the whisper of the dart.



EH?



Get
out here,
cowards!

Or die in
hiding! Either
way, my bullets
will find you!



He's rewarded with a
scream, and a dart gun
tumbles out into view.

He waits for the
body to follow it.



What he is not expecting
is for the very air itself
to attack him.

Air that feels a
good deal like an
all-too-solid fist.

"Not-Men." The words
come back to him now...



...and make as much sense as
something senseless can make.

His bag with his supplies is
torn away from him and he
watches in shock as it floats
away...



...and then with a roar,
the billy-bumbler comes
out of nowhere, to
attack nothing...



... 'cept the nothing
quickly becomes
something.



Realizing that he's fighting
men and not spirits, Roland
quickly regains his wits...



...and the men who had
gone from being nothing
to something...



...quickly go back to
being nothing again.



*Their bodies have barely hit the ground
and Roland has already forgotten them.
Instead he is at Aileen's side...*

*...yanking the dart clear...
trying to suck the poison
from the wound...*



*...and then trying to
start her heart.*

*For long minutes he goes on,
long past when any rational
man would know to quit.*



Finally...

Every time I looked
into your eyes, Aileen,
I knew what you felt for
me...and what you
wanted me to feel
for you.

And I
did...in my
own way.

Of all those
I wish I *could* have
loved...*you* were
the one I wished
for the most.



Oh God, Aileen...you
deserve so much *more* of
a final mourner than one who
has long ago cried out his
last tears. I am so
sorry...for everything.

Go in peace...
and I will join you
when I can.



It is two days later when Roland finally enters the ghost town that is all that remains of Gilead.

STILL
accompanying
me, creature? I
have to warn
you....

Everyone who
has ever followed
me has paid for
that "honor" with
their lives.

Just so
you know
what you're
getting
into.



You're not exactly seeing Gilead at its best. Once, every corner of it teemed with life.

Now it's overgrown with death.



Appropriate, I guess, that I've come here. Like is drawn to like.

I *am* death and thus drawn to it.



Death to death. Ashes to ashes. Dust to dust.

Rest in the arms of Cort, who was as a father to you.



Rest, for you have *more* than earned it.



The armory.
There were nights
where my dreams
were filled with
nothing but *visions*
of this place.

It was
sacred,
billy-bumbler.
Sacred.



Not anymore,
though. Now,
nothing is sacred
here...

...and I'm
just another
scavenger,
taking what
he can...



...but
there's no
harm in
looking.



Hmmm.
Not too
ominous.

Tinks.

It does
indeed
stink.

A small
bottle of
spirits.

Worthless
for drinking,
but adequate
for cleaning
wounds.

And then, a short
distance away...

...he hears inhuman
growling, things
being smashed.



It takes him long moments to understand what he's witnessing.

Slow Mutants, attacking a family of billy-bumblers that had apparently been nesting in the stoves.



He could leave, of course.
This ain't his problem.

But considering how
fast his gun is in his hand
and he starts blasting...



...I have to think that leaving
the billy-bumblers to their
fate never entered his mind.

Although, truth to tell,
since the death of Aileen,
he might well be in the
mood to just kill anything
that's willing to present
a target.

Unfortunately, being a
target goes both ways...



...as he is quickly reminded
when the teeth of a Slow
Mutant sink into his shoulder.



*And yet again,
Roland owes his life
to the actions of a
billy-bumbler...this
one a mere cub...*



*...and yet as vicious and vallant
as any adult bumbler could be.*



*Not that he'll ever have the chance
to know firsthand, unfortunately.*



*Bastard! Even one
of those creatures is
worth ten of you!*

As if Roland needed further proof that billy-bumblers are far more than just dumb animals...

...he takes a moment to marvel at the strategy in which they scream into the oversized ears of the Slow Mutants...



...using their sharp hearing against them.



*It leaves Roland wondering
just which ones are the
true animals in the room.*





Are you all right? Any bites? They can get septic if left untreated...

No. No, you seem whole. Good. I'll attend to my own wounds, then.



My...apologies. If we had arrived only moments earlier, we might have saved a few of the pack.

I am... sorry.



ARRROOOOOOOOO



I know how you feel.

I, too, have seen far too many of my kind die at enemy hands--



Eh--?

Who goes there!

Identify yourself unless you want to die!



Already died,
boy, thanks to
you, long time
ago...

...so my
wants in that
regard don't
mean squat.

On the other
hand, my wants as
to whether you
join me in
death...

...well, *that's*
still open to
debate.

TO BE CONTINUED

THE JOURNEY CONTINUES.



Dear Fellow Constant
Readers:

Welcome to issue 2 of our new story arc! I hope that you are enjoying Roland's latest adventure and are journeying forward with a sense of excitement and discovery. I know I am. Though I must admit, writing about Roland's lost years is also a little scary, since I never know how readers are going to react. Whenever I pick up my pen I feel like I'm swimming into one of those uncharted regions located at the edge of an old map. I may find gold, but I could also end up in one of those dangerous places labeled with warnings like *here there be dragons* . . .

For longtime *Gunslinger* fans, the beginning of the last issue was a familiar one which meant that I was on solid ground. As in the original novel, Roland trekked across the Mohaine Desert in pursuit of the Man in Black, and along the way met a mad old man with a Silva compass and then a corn-growing desert dweller named Brown. While palavering with Brown, Roland met Brown's pet raven, Zoltan,

and heard Zoltan's humorous but vaguely sinister pronouncements (*Beans, beans, the musical fruit and Screw you and the horse you rode in on*). From there we flashed back to the horrible conclusion of the gunslingers' last stand against Farson's bloodthirsty forces, and witnessed Roland's escape from a human bonfire atop Jericho Hill. We remained firmly and unarguably on the Beam, and so I breathed a sigh of relief.

But though the opening of issue 1 was familiar, its conclusion and the trajectory of the comic book you presently hold in your hands may have caught some readers by surprise. After all, in Book VII of the series Walter O'Dim tells us that *Roland* escaped the Jericho Hill massacre by burying himself in a cart filled with the dead and then creeping out of the slaughterpile at sundown just before the whole works were set alight, but he didn't tell us that Aileen had escaped as well. But then again, Aileen only received a brief mention in the original novels. Hence what is she doing in our story at all? And whose





idea was it to put Not-Men and then a *billy bumbler* into the tale...?

Am I sounding paranoid? Perhaps I am, and perhaps I'm just articulating my own fears and anxieties. But I've traveled Mid-World's byways long enough to know that there are many Dark Tower fans out there who are profoundly shocked when they think I've broken with Dark Tower tradition or when I've created a plotline very different from the one they've anticipated or created themselves. To these readers I may seem to have fallen off the Beam, but I assure you, wholeheartedly, that I have not. Following the Path of the Beam, and remembering the faces of my fathers (and mothers), is always foremost in my mind.

Coming under fire for what you have (or haven't) written is every writer's worst nightmare, but unfortunately it's also one of the hazards of the profession. Anticipating such criticism is never fun, but in truth I've been on both

sides of the desk and so I try my best to listen with an open mind no matter how much the comments sting (ouch!) and no matter how loudly I want to cry out, *but you don't understand what I was trying to do...!* After all, for years I made part of my living by searching for continuity errors in the original Dark Tower storylines. My job was catching any little mistakes that might arouse the ire of fans, and I guess I was pretty good at it. In fact, Steve made a little in-joke about it in *Song of Susannah*. Does anybody out there remember Trudy Damascus, whom Susannah Dean met during her first appearance in 1999, New York? If you do, you may recall that Trudy worked for a high-powered accounting firm called Guttenberg, Furth, and Patel. Patel was the last name of one of Steve's real-life accountants and I always figured that Guttenberg came from the press of the same name, but the Furth referred to me. Like Trudy, my job was to be a pain-in-the-butt taskmaster—an accountant of a different kind.



But seriously folks, whenever I break from the original Dark Tower storyline I always have a very good reason for doing so. In my opinion, it is sometimes necessary to ignore the letter of the law in order to honor the spirit of it, and honoring the spirit of Dark Tower is what I always aim to do. As everybody knows, transforming a novel into a graphic novel is an act of translation, and effective translations sometimes require change. Those of you who have seen Blade Runner and have also read its inspiration, *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*, know exactly what I'm talking about. Fans of the original Philip K. Dick novel must have been shocked by the liberties Ridley Scott took with the story when he made the film, but in my humble opinion, the final

movie was worth it.

As a writer who is extending a much-loved story and who is simultaneously moving it into a new medium, I am completely dependent upon the dictates of my gut. I have no other choice, since from where I stand on the wind-blasted hardpan of the Mohaine, the desert sands are identical in every direction. To find the Beam, I must use my inner compass. And even if some part of me cries *YIKES! What are you doing?* I follow that quiet inner voice. After all, that's what Steve King does, and what better teacher could I have than that?

As fellow Dark Tower fans have pointed out to me on numerous occasions, *I have* taken some liberties with the original story, and nowhere is that more evident than in the issue you now hold in your hands. In the Dark Tower books, Aileen plays an almost non-existent role and she most certainly does not lie tangled with the corpses of Gilead's dead gunslingers. How could she? But in the Dark Tower *comics*, she is one of Gilead's heroes, and it is only right that she fulfils this role. You see, if I left Aileen out of our tale, and if I did not give our young gunslingers at least one female companion, I would be doing them, and Roland, and Stephen King, a terrible disservice. As a woman warrior, Aileen fulfils the spirit of the Dark Tower books, if not the absolute truth of Roland's past. Because if there is one absolute truth about Roland, it is that he has a hearty respect for female fighters. Those of

you who have read *Wolves of the Calla* know exactly what I'm talking about. When Roland is faced with one of his most dangerous adversaries—the Greencloaks or Wolves who invade the Calla every generation in order to steal children—his battle plans depend upon the bravery and fighting skills of the entirely female Sisters of Oriza. And when Eddie Dean is being attacked by the great Bear Shardik at the beginning of *The Waste Lands*, Roland makes Susannah Dean slay the beast, since he has every confidence in her as a woman, and as a gunslinger. If it weren't for Aileen, comic book readers would assume that—like his forefathers—Roland believed in an absolute separation of male and female roles. Readers would know Roland the angry young man who wanted vengeance on his mother, and Roland, the heartbroken young lover unable to save the life of the girl he loved, but not Roland the battle commander who is willing to use any skilled warrior he can, regardless of their gender, age, or color.

Another of the liberties I take with Roland's past is that I have our hero honor Aileen's final wish and

agree to lay her to rest in the tomb of Gilead's gunslingers. And though purists may claim that this never happened—and that it never could happen—I say once more that I am trying to honor yet another aspect of Roland's complex character. In Book VII of the Dark Tower novels, we learn how important it is for Roland to give those he loves a decent burial. And while I won't give any spoilers and say who this loved one is (or even if there is more than one) I will say that if Roland didn't lay at least one of his old companions to rest in an honorable fashion, our final image of Jericho Hill would be of Roland saving his own skin, not of Roland honoring the dead.

As I have said on many occasions, part of Roland's appeal is the Romance element of his character. And by using the term Romance I'm referring to the Arthurian Romances, and the aspect of Roland that is a knight serving a higher cause. But I suppose that—as a female reader—I must admit that there is a little bit of the *other* kind of romance in this tale as well. For something in me is deeply satisfied to know that it is Aileen—alone among the younger generation of gunslingers—that Roland lays to rest in the arms of her forefathers. By fulfilling the final wish of a woman who loved him, Roland behaves chivalrously, a chivalry made even more poignant since readers know that in life, Roland never returned Aileen's adoration. But in terms of the heroic ideal, Roland's journey with the dying Aileen is equally important. After all, Aileen is the niece of Roland's old teacher, Cort.





Hence by honoring Aileen, Roland simultaneously honors Cort and Cort's line.

And as for adding a bumbler to our tale, what can I say? I love bumlbers. When I asked Steve's permission to include one in the present story he gave an enthusiastic thumbs up. His only requirement was that our bumbler show himself to be of Oy's ka-tet, and so he will. I just won't spoil the tale by telling you how. And as for those pesky Not-Men, rest assured that they too shall serve the Beam, albeit in an unexpected way.

On this note, my fellow Constant Readers, I shall leave you. And for those of you who still wish that I'd plotted this section of our story a little closer to the one you hold in your heart, I offer these words of conciliation. *There are other worlds than these.* The Dark Tower universe contains many parallel earths and many parallel Mid-Worlds. Hence, there's room for *all* of our stories. On some level of the Dark Tower the tale

that you've just read is playing itself out, but on another level the tale that you've constructed is also taking place. And for me, that is one of the great pleasures of fiction. There's room for everybody. And to those *folken* who may feel that I'm playing too fast and loose with Roland's lost years, I say what else can I do? I could play it safe and perhaps bore you to tears, or I can leap off into the unknown and take a chance. And to tell you the truth, I'd always prefer to surprise you than to bore you!

And so my friends, I will leave you. Until next month I remain your devoted tet-mate,

Robin Furth

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SEAN PHILLIPS' ORIGINAL INKS FOR THIS ISSUE'S COVER.



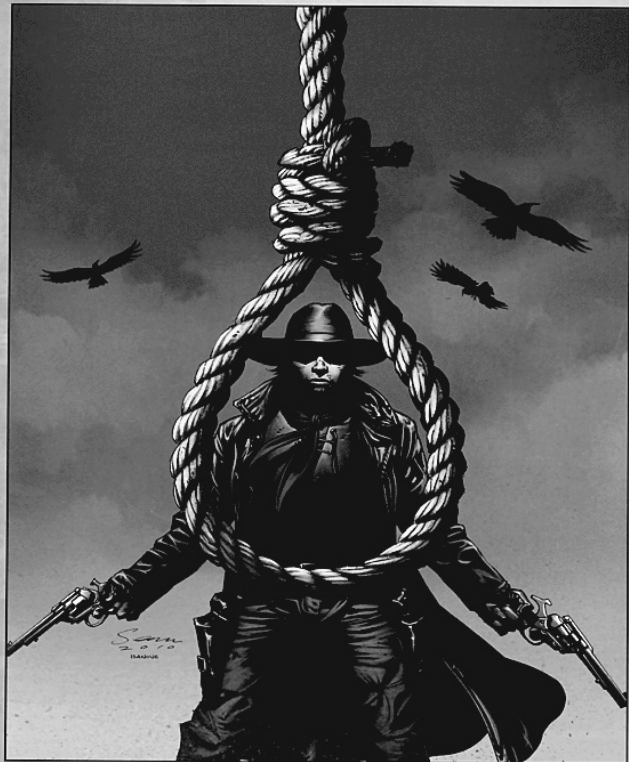
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NEXT
ROLAND VERSUS THE GHOSTS OF GALLOW'S HILL!





All is not well in Mid-World. Gunslinger Roland Deschain, the young man whose destiny it is to seek and save the Dark Tower, has seen his father's Affiliation fall to the Good Man's forces. With his ka-tet murdered and Gilead in ruins, the troubled Deschain is now truly alone for the first time in his life. But there is hope: Roland stalks the deserts in search of the Man in Black, who holds the key to righting this out-of-synch world. What lies in wait for the world's last gunslinger, though, no seeing sphere could portend...

From the creative team that brought Roland's early adventures to life comes a new phase in the saga of the last gunslinger. This is a dark chronicle of revenge, lust, betrayal, and destiny—a cosmic quest that could only be conceived by master storyteller Stephen King.

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